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ADDRESS

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TO THE

OFFICERS COMPOSING THE

MEDICAL STAFF,

BY

SAMUEL L. MITCHILL, M. D. & P.

SURGEON GENERAL OF THE MILITIA,

IN THE

STATE OF NEW-YORK.

NEW-YORK :

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1820.

At a Meeting of the *New-York Military Medical Staff Society*, held at the College Hall, on the evening of the 14th inst. *It was resolved*,

That a Committee, consisting of two, be appointed, to wait on the Surgeon General, *Doctor MITCHILL*, and request him to publish his CIRCULAR.

It was further *resolved* by the Society, That the said Committee consist of Doctors D. L. ROGERS, and BAXTER.

JOHN W. STERLING, Sec'y.

CIRCULAR.



GENTLEMEN,

DURING a season of peace and prosperity, when every citizen is occupied in his individual pursuits, more than in guarding against public danger, there appears a peculiar propriety in presenting to you, a few subjects for consideration.

Although, at present, there is no field for the great operations of Military Surgery, the Surgeon General believes the talents of the Surgeons attached to the Hospital Department and to Regiments, and those of their respective assistants, may be constantly and worthily employed, in promoting the great objects for which they are commissioned, and in contributing to the advancement of the profession at large.

We live in a section of the globe, where at all times, diseases and painful accidents are frequent, and where the aid of professional men is sought with great solicitude. The deference thus paid to the opinion and character of Doctors, places them on elevated ground. By common consent, they are the guides and directors of health. To the honour of our country it has been remarked, that where to intelligence and activity, there is united a correct morality, a suffering individual and his family rest upon their Physician with perfect confidence; and well they may. A seat in the House and in the Senate; high commands in the Army and Navy; and the dignity of Governor in the States, has frequently been conferred, by the voice of the people, the legitimate source of authority, upon medical men.

The public sentiment in favour of the faculty, has been strongly expressed in as many places, as there are schools of medicine. It is right, in our condition of society, to adopt the measures necessary for forming able Physicians and Surgeons. No person is exempt from the casualties that may render their help important. All rational creatures pray that the healing powers may be propitious. So they ought.

Distempers often assail with vehemence, domestic and settled life. More severe and formidable are their attacks upon the exposed, and sometimes unsheltered soldier. Both kinds of malady require your particular study. During the absence of tumult and war, you can improve the opportunities afforded for observation. You can watch symptoms with calmness and care. There are none of the marchings nor counter-marchings of a campaign to interrupt you.

In this posture of things, I recommend to you, the observance of EPIDEMIC DISEASES. They come and they go, in a way that is not yet well understood. It ought to be comprehended, if possible, how far they are connected with solar influence, terrestrial effluvia, atmospheric change, corporeal predisposition, or other causes. Your opportunities are excellent. You traverse all the inhabited parts of the commonwealth. The commencement, progress and termination of such maladies, are open to your view. You know into what they degenerate, when wholly neglected or unskilfully treated.

That my meaning may be comprehended, I offer a few examples.

Our *Winter Fevers* may possibly visit us again. Though they were skilfully described, among other writers, by North, Gallup and Wilson, their re-appearance deserves the utmost vigilance. It is not their mortality alone, that deserves attention. Their obscure origin, when snow and ice lock up the miasmata of marshes, and where the sequestered abodes of the sick forbid the entrance of contagion, ought to be illuminated by the torch of science. It is deemed es-

essential to trace the operation of animal food, and of ardent spirits, upon constitutions thus invaded.

Should the *Pneumonia Typhoides*, so fatal to our armies during the late war, break out once more, every memorable fact concerning it ought to be recorded. A disease attacking the vital organs with so much fury, merits the most particular notice. There will be no small satisfaction in discovering the morbid predisposition and cause; in ascertaining the injury done to the bodily organs, and the value or inefficacy of prescriptions. The writings of Mann, Heustis and Waterhouse, will afford you encouragement and direction on these and similar inquiries.

The *Influenza*, or *General Catarrh*, has had an extensive prevalence during the present autumn. Additions are wanted to complete its rational history. The prevalence of such wide-spreading disorders, their fore-runners, their concomitants, and their consequences, are all of high moment to medicine and to mankind.

Dysenteries merit the most particular attention. Connected with the food and drink received into the alimentary canal, they rage with a distressful, and frequently, a destructive sway. The amount of disorder in the stomach and intestines; the degree and type of the fever; the connexion of both with the air respired, invite the most careful inquiry: as also do the circumstances relative to their origin and communication.

Who are more capable than you, to observe every thing that relates to the *Remitting and Intermitting Fevers*, which almost every season prevail to some degree and extent, over certain districts? Whether they assume the solemn aspect of the *Bilious, Malignant, Autumnal, or Yellow*, or the milder complexion of *Quotidian, Tertian or Quartan*; there are circumstances that often solicit the regard of the medical philosopher. It must be owned, we are at this moment in want of a satisfactory theory of *Fever*, notwithstanding the labours of Boerhaave, Cullen, Darwin and Rush. You are called upon to furnish information, in this

exigency. Perhaps from some quarter whence it is least expected, the long-sought light may shine. I should exult with a joy greater than I can express, if, in my day, the phenomena upon this momentous but abstruse subject, could be generalized into a science.

It would be useful to make correct entries in a book, of all the memorable events, medical, surgical or collateral, that come within your observation. From this they may be copied from time to time, and forwarded for insertion in one of the respectable journals published quarterly in New-York, Boston and Philadelphia.

It is suggested as a steady rule of conduct, in all important cases, to inquire, by actual inspection, into the morbid alterations wrought by disease.

The situation and employment of many of you is favourable to a knowledge of our indigenous simples, and an acquaintance with their virtues. The forests and fields are rich with vegetable productions of almost every sort. The Physician, as he rides through the woods, beholds sanative plants on the right and the left; and the Surgeon, as he journeys along the highway, may be said to pass through an avenue of vulnerary herbs. In ascertaining their names, localities and uses, you will not only act worthily for yourselves and your patients, but advantageously for the whole profession, and the human race.

The residence of some of those whom I address, is favourable to a more minute acquaintance with the distemper in rabid brutes, which, by their bites, excites hydrophobia in man. Your attention is particularly invited to mad foxes and mad wolves, as well as to mad dogs. The gazettes, for several years, have contained shocking recitals of attacks made in their paroxysms of fury, upon man and domestic animals. It is hoped we shall obtain an embodied history of those mournful occurrences, written at full length by competent members of the staff, instead of being left to the authors of casual paragraphs, soon to be forgotten and lost.

From men so happily located as you are, we naturally expect intelligence concerning the topography of the country. After the excellent descriptions of New-York County, by Akerly; of Jefferson County, by Henderson; and of Saratoga, by Steel; more may be expected. Would the sons of *Æsculapius* really perform as much as they are capacitated to achieve, a shower of information would descend upon us. For such exercises, yourselves are better qualified, by reason of your scientific education, and your enlarged opportunities for survey, than any other persons. The former prepares you to understand, and the latter enables you to arrange and narrate. In examining the soil you tread, you will not fail to note the composition of the strata, of the issuing waters, and of the incumbent air. I exhort you to collect and preserve those monuments of the former generations of created beings, the remains of antediluvian vegetables and animals, which are distributed in many places through the ground and the rocks.

It cannot be considered foreign to my purpose, to invite your attention to the effects of certain deleterious agents upon ourselves and other creatures. The poisonous operation of the *Sumachs*, for example, by their effluvia and juices, has not been thoroughly investigated. The slabbering disease of horses, deserves a more profound inquiry than has been bestowed upon it. If it arises from the acrid juice of succulent plants, in the pasture, it becomes us to know, by a series of well-conducted experiments and observations, what those productions are. When detected, it may, perhaps, be possible to eradicate them from the meadows. The facts concerning the death of oxen, after eating the leaves and twigs of the wild-cherry-tree, ought to be properly stated.

The effects of the venom of the rattle-snake and of the black-adder, deserve a more minute and careful inquiry, from the citizens of a country infested by those serpents. Their history, their seasons of greatest virulence, and an account of the best remedies among the great number recom-

mended, ought to be given in a form worthy of the age, and the society in which we live.

Spurred rye has become a fashionable remedy. Yet injurious effects are ascribed to ergotted bread-corn, when used in diet, by the inhabitants of France and of some other parts of Europe. Its action upon the health of our citizens ought to be fully investigated, and to you I commit the inquiry. Such diseased grain, or a fungus sprouting up in the place of grain, is at best, suspicious. There is no doubt, in my mind, that all the spurred-rye and wheat, ought to be separated from the grist, before it is carried to the mill. But if careless persons omit this precaution, and eat bread containing such an improper ingredient, the operation ought to be traced by Physicians. Its alleged noxious action upon domestic animals, cannot fail to attract your attention.

For the present, I shall content myself with the hints contained in the preceding paragraphs ; while I request that your liberality and patriotism may receive them in the same spirit that they are written. You are young, with the world of business and usefulness in broad display before you. Act as becomes yourselves and your stations, and you will receive the reward due to excellent deeds.

I congratulate you on the completion of the National Pharmacopæia, which may be shortly expected from the press.

Every order to me from the Commander in Chief, touching the Medical Staff, shall be immediately communicated to you.

I beg you to remember, that on all occasions, in peace and war, I shall labour to promote our country's welfare, and to discern and appreciate merit in the individuals belonging to my department.

SAMUEL L. MITCHILL,

SURGEON GENERAL, &c.

State of New-York, Nov. 18, 1820.

Med. Hist.

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